



Forgive but Not Forget? The Image of War in Culture and Historical Memory

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Oleg Barabanov

Foreword: Memory of War and Wars of Memory

Historical memory and how it is understood play a major role in forming civic solidarity, creating links between generations and making citizens feel like they have a personal stake in the state affairs. At the international level, the harmonisation and convergence of historical narratives in different countries could prove instrumental in establishing a constructive dialogue between societies on contemporary issues and overcoming existing negative stereotypes of other countries and their people. In this way, historical memory is a value that drives social and political behaviour in a meaningful way. The 75th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War casts the influence of historical memory on modern politics and public opinion in stark relief.

Over the past three decades, there has been a greater focus on reinterpreting and reconstructing historical memory across the world, not least in Central and Eastern Europe. In many countries of the region, these processes were set in motion by the emergence of newly independent states and the collapse of the socialist system. Historical memory began to play a key role in shaping the ethnic identity of states and the policy of cultivating new values and attitudes in public opinion. This example clearly illustrates the direct connection between the values of historical memory and nationalism, understood both in the broader civic (positive) sense and, in some cases, in the narrow negative sense of national exceptionalism.

Among other things, these processes led to conflicting national historical narratives. Some of them began to have a major impact on the politics of the day and on political stereotypes of other countries and people. At times, the result has been actual wars. In virtually all armed conflicts in Europe over the past 30 years, mutually exclusive historical narratives have played a significant role in polarising public opinion and escalating conflict. The months leading up

to Victory Day have inflamed the wars of historical memory over World War II. The chain of events is well known, the reasons are clear, and so there's no need to dwell on them.

More importantly, we know from the conflict resolution literature that it is much harder to solve conflicts of values, such as historical memory, than conflicts of interests. Confronted with opposing interests, there is always the possibility that some kind of compromise can be reached by identifying the limits of the negotiating space and beginning to slowly move towards a mutually acceptable solution. Values are not subject to compromise. They represent a kind of primordial paradigm governing our behaviour, so it is extremely difficult to bridge divides over values. However, it should be noted that even though historical memory is a value, the politics of shaping historical memory is a matter of national interest, as noted above. Thus, a conflict of values can express itself as a conflict of interests. While this complicates matters, it also creates space to identify solutions.

Historical memory, such as memory of World War II, is shaped in a variety of ways. There is the expert knowledge available to a fairly small group of historians who are familiar with the sources and trained in historical research. At first glance, it would appear easier for them to reach consensus (the Russian-Polish group of historians on complex issues at the turn of the 2000s and in the 2010s is a case in point). However, as the saying goes, "one cannot live in society and be free of society," and historians are no exception. Indeed, some scholars' willingness to fashion narratives that were politically convenient in their societies likely played an important part in escalating historical memory wars.

Historical memory, as reflected in public opinion, is not broadly shaped by scholarly books or articles. The media and cultural spaces play the key role here in translating historical knowledge (and, occasionally, historical myths). Speeches by politicians, resolutions of parliaments and political parties on historical issues, interviews with historians in popular publications, documentary and feature films, prose, poetry and much more are the mechanisms by which historical memory is created.

Understanding how such mechanisms operate and how various historical assessments and attitudes spread in public opinion is of particular importance

when analysing the politics of historical memory. As such, this Valdai report is divided into two parts that are related to this issue. One consists of a general analysis of the image of war in the modern cultural space. The focus here is World War II, but other armed conflicts that have become the basis for numerous films and books are cited liberally to better illuminate the patterns. The other part is a special research project that is important for understanding the overall picture, and is devoted to efforts to inculcate in German society a perception of the end of World War II as Germany's liberation. Here the issue is more about translating historical narratives through the media and socio-political space rather than the cultural space. This two-pronged approach sheds light on various aspects of how historical memory is shaped in public opinion.

Konstantin Pakhalyuk of the Russian Military History Society discusses the image of war in modern culture in his section of the paper. He considers various philosophical concepts of war and related media narratives that reveal images of war to the public in a particular form, with an emphasis on the interplay of opposites. For example, there are two narratives: one of them is heroic, and the other one is tragic. In the first one, depictions of war emphasise heroic feats and valour. This approach is closely linked with the military ethic, which is based on concepts of courage and honour; war is seen in the context of defending life and safeguarding the freedom and independence of the homeland. In the second, tragic narrative, the focus is on the horrors of war, the many victims, the destruction, war crimes and human suffering.

To be sure, war contains plenty of both, and these narratives are not in any tension, but rather address different aspects of war. The only question is how they are correlated. Finding a balance is important. If the balance is upset, war may become completely devoid of glory, as is the case in modern culture. In its ultimate form, this narrative is actualised in the so-called "dark war narrative" which seeks to prove that war brings out the worst in humans, where patriotism is replaced by philistine sarcasm and alienation. In this context, the author addresses the much broader subject of the "post-heroic" society in the modern world as an integral part of global consumer culture. In his paper, the author compares these narratives, showing how approaches to them overlap and diverge in Russian and international culture, and in the media landscape.

Memory of the war in public consciousness is closely linked with the memory of reconciliation. President Putin has repeatedly spoken about

Russia's historical reconciliation with Germany as the most important political and social achievement of our countries and peoples. As such, it is important to discuss how historical memory of World War II has been shaped in Germany. A better understanding of this process by Russian analysts and the broader public would seem to foster effective, trust-based dialogue between our countries' expert communities (historians and political scientists) and civil societies. This is also important because Russian-German historical reconciliation was not an instantaneous development; it is an ongoing process that still requires systematic work with public opinion.

The section contributed by Dr. Matthias Uhl of the Moscow-based German Historical Institute goes into some depth about how the conclusion of World War II is seen in Germany. Uhl analyses the historical evolution of public conceptions in both post-war German states, the GDR and the FRG, and then in the unified modern state of Germany. It was not all smooth sailing, and there was some resistance in German public opinion to accepting the view that the Allies' victory over Nazism in fact represented the liberation of Germany. The author describes this psychologically and politically complex process of substituting liberation for defeat with the support of factual and analytical materials that fit the general tenor of discussions about the role of historical memory in modern Germany.

The 75th anniversary of Victory and the war's conclusion are at the centre of a significant amount of research as well as Russia's media and cultural landscape. Importantly, this renewed focus on historical memory must not slacken once the celebrations are over. If we want public opinion to be stable on this set of issues, it is important to ensure that memory of the Great War and Victory remains instrumental in the effort to consolidate our societies rather than a one-off campaign.

Konstantin Pakhalyuk

Images of War in Modern Culture

Although World War II is still the most recent example of total war, and the Cold War ended more than 25 years ago, the ideal of perpetual peace has remained elusive. Today's armed conflicts are not as intense and bloody as those waged for the better part of the 20th century, but today's world can hardly be called safe.

Increasingly the concept of war in the public space of Russia and Western countries is used only metaphorically to refer to social conflict, economic hostility or differences rooted in media and culture – so-called economic, cultural, information and other “wars” – whereas the language surrounding armed conflicts proper is marked by euphemisms, such as anti-terrorist operation, humanitarian intervention, police action and the like. In other words, at the normative level, war has become an instrument of international relations that is avoided as a rule, and yet none of the states that claim a significant role in international politics is going to renounce the use of force. Therefore, the question is how and in what cases using force will not only be expedient but justified by people and the international community.

Russian philosopher Arseniy Kumankov argues that contemporary political and philosophical thought is dominated by four major approaches to understanding war. Political realists view it in the context of promoting national interests and regulating international relations; just war theorists seek to formulate moral limits on war, from the declaration and rules of war to the subsequent world order; pacifists reject war as such, while militarists considers it a highly moral act that brings out the best human qualities.¹

These competing conceptualisations of war provide an opportunity for a fresh perspective on the phenomenon of war. However, it is worth stepping away from considerations of the various modes of war's cultural reproduction for a while, and instead try to explain how images of war come interact with the world of politics and how military action is culturally codified in the modern world, as well as why the cultural reflection

¹ Kumankov A. *Voina, ili v plenu nasiliya*. SPb, 2019. P. 15-23.

of military experience matters and what exactly it involves. Undoubtedly, the search for answers requires a detailed discussion, and we can only outline the main trends in broad strokes in this paper.

From the standpoint of political elites, the key problem is the moral justification and legitimisation of violence. For society, though, the consumption of images of wars – both past wars and those currently being waged on the “world’s periphery” – represents an encounter with *potential risks*, such as backsliding to an era of total war or the potential of a terrorist attack, and, at the same time, a *way to study them as symbols*. Emphasis on real victories of the past or fictitious successes (for example, the many Hollywood thrillers about the terrorist threat) can boost public optimism. However, this carries the risk of instilling a perception of war as something easy, which may have negative consequences. Here’s a historical example. In the early 20th century, a potential future European war was seen by the educated classes in Europe as a walk in the park, moreover, a welcome one which does not pose a great danger. This miscalculation contributed to the fact that during the July crisis of 1914 militaristic policies at the top received widespread support in Russia, Germany, France, and the UK.

For the vast majority of the people in developed countries, war is no longer an experience that they have had or are likely to have. However, images and representations of war are being created in the public space that can serve to remind everyone of the fragility of peace. In a late 2019 interview, the philosopher Andrei Teslya fairly accurately diagnosed the modern world’s fundamental problem as a crisis of normality, which manifests itself in a variety of anxieties, the manufacture of which (instead of predictability and stability) is gradually becoming a social management strategy in modern states.² The domination of military images in the public space that metaphorically³ structure modern political, social and cultural differences (for example, presenting disagreements on historical matters as “memory wars”) is more likely to contribute to a less flexible, if not monotonously binary, perception of the social world, thereby legitimising tougher and uncompromising approaches, as well as increased government interference in private life.⁴

² “Gosudarstvo, kotoroye vosproizvodit trevogu” [interview with Andrei Teslya] // *Ekspert*. 2020. Nos. 1-3. URL: <https://expert.ru/expert/2020/01/gosudarstvo-kotoroe-proizvodit-trevogu>. See also. Budraitskis I. *Mir, kotoryy postroil Huntington i v kotorom zhivem vse my*. M., 2020. P. 31.

³ Here, we refer to the cognitive metaphor theory by G. Lakoff and M. Johnson. See.: G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*. Quoted by *Metafory, kotorymi my zhivem*. M., 2012.

⁴ See: Sergeyev V.M., Alekseyenkova Ye.S. “Snova nadzirat i nakazyvat? K ocherednomu izdaniyu politseiskogo gosudarstva, ili nazad v srednevekoye.” *Valdaiskiye zapiski*. № 27. M., 2015. URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/valdayskaya-zapiska-27/>.

Images of war: Between historical memory and political pragmatism⁵

Politically, the cultural reflection of war is bound up in two different but interrelated problems: the formation of macro-political identities and delineating the boundaries of (il)legitimate use of armed violence. While historical images obviously play a key role in the first case, they are also instrumental in understanding current conflicts. Let's take a closer look at the aforementioned means of political actualisation of war imagery.

Ideas about the common past have been of great importance in fostering national unity ever since nation states came into being in the 18th century. As the Canadian scholar Bernard Yack notes, regardless of whether we are talking about civic or ethnic nations, the idea of a common heritage is the main qualifier that distinguishes a national community from other types of social integration.⁶ However, historian Aleida Assman and sociologist Sigmund Bauman maintain that serious changes began in the last third of the 20th century in the self-awareness of many countries' citizens in the conventional "Western" and "European" world, described as the "fall of the modern time regime".⁷ The disappearance of the image of the future led to the endless expansion of the "eternal present" (the postmodern philosopher Jean Baudrillard theorised back in the 1980s) and the growing importance of the shared past, which was increasingly used either to shore up political legitimacy, or as a potential source of knowledge about modern times or a means of forming various types of social solidarity. The memorial boom (the start of which is usually dated to the 1970s and 1980s) and the increasing politicisation of various historical subjects both within European countries and in the international arena demonstrate how these processes have been playing out.⁸ While back in the 1990s and 2000s,

⁵ This section is the result of research conducted with the financial support of the Russian Science Foundation, Project No. 17-18-01589.

⁶ See: Yack B. *Nationalism and the Moral Psychology of Community*. Quoted by *Natsionalizm i moral'naya psikhologiya soobshchestva*. M., 2017.

⁷ Assman A. *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen?: Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne*. Quoted by *Raspalas' svyaz' vremyon? Vzlyot i padeniye temporalnogo rezhima Moderna*. M.: *Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye*, 2016; Bauman Z. *Retrotopiya*. M.: VTSIOM, 2019.

⁸ Isayev Ye. "Publichnaya istoriya v Rossii: nauchniyi uchebniy kontekst formirovaniya novogo mezhdistsiplinarnogo polya" // *Vestnik Permskogo universiteta. Seriya "Istoriya"*. 2016. № 2 (33). P. 8-10; Khmelevskaya Yu.Yu. "Istoriki i 'poleznoye proshloye': k voprosu o distsiplinarnykh granitsakh i distsipliniruyushchikh funktsiyakh istorii v sovremennom obshchestve" // *Vestnik Permskogo universiteta. Seriya "Istoriya"*. 2016. № 1 (32). P. 169; Akkermann F., Akkermann Ya., Littke A., Nisser Zh., Tomann Yu. "Prikladnaya istoriya, ili publichnoye izmereniye proshlogo" // *Neprikosnovennyy zapas*. 2012. № 3. URL: https://www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/neprikosnovennyy_zapas/83_nz_3_2012/article/18791/ (accessed 27.02.2019).

discussions around memory were regarded by the political science community as a sideshow, by the 2010s the situation had changed. Notably, the last issue of the *Economist* for 2018 opened with an editorial symptomatically titled The Uses of Nostalgia: “Politicians have always exploited the past. But just now, rich countries and emerging economies are experiencing an outbreak of nostalgia. Right and left, democracies and autocracies, all are harking back to the glories of yesteryear.”⁹

Russia, with its growing interest in historical memory, is no exception. True, our case was aggravated by the fact that it coincided with the collapse of Soviet state institutions and the formation of an entirely new polity, which encouraged thinking about the foundations of a new macro-political identity that would validate the existing order as fundamentally correct and not in need of revision. Usually, this is done through invoking some transcendence (value), such as God, nation, ethnos, justice, democracy, or socialism, to name a few. However, for various reasons, the attempts to formulate these core values in the 1990s and 2000s failed, and only in the 2010s – the era of the conservative “right turn” – did history reassert itself.¹⁰ Whereas in the United States, France, or Germany, turning to history was *one of the methods* of substantiating political unity, which involved using concrete examples to strengthen commitment to consolidating values that are depicted as universal (democracy and human rights), in Russia this set of values is actually disappearing, and stories about history have become the *key method* for the symbolic assembly of the Russian polity.

Instead of searching for universal values, which were finally rejected in favour of a particularism wrapped in the rhetoric of defending historical truth, where the main evidence is an appeal to facts and documents. Is it any wonder that politicians’ speeches about history nowadays are increasingly reminiscent of lectures? In less than a decade, we have come a long way from developing specialised institutes devoted to the politics of memory to an actual proposal to amend the constitution to state explicitly that the Russian Federation is united by “a thousand-

⁹ *The uses of nostalgia // The Economist. 2018-2019. 22 Dec. – 4 Jan. P.11.*

¹⁰ *See: Kasje S.I. Politicheskaya teologiya i nation-building: obshchiye polozheniya, rossiyskiy sluchai. M., 2012; Pakhalyuk K.A. Istoricheskoye proshloye kak osnovaniye rossiyskoi politii. Na primere vystupleniy Vladimira Putina v 2012-2018 gg. // Politika. 2018. № 4. P. 6-31.*

year history” and should “honour the defenders of the Fatherland” and “preserve historical truth.”¹¹ Opinion polls show that the decision to make history the foundation of the Russian polity correlates to some extent with what a significant part of the population thinks, since the subject of historical memory is at least perceived as significant. For example, 96% of Russians (in 2017) strongly agreed that it is essential to know the history of one’s country¹², while 90% are proud of Russian history and the army (2016 survey),¹³ and 83% consider it necessary to combat the falsification of history.¹⁴

The growing clamour for history and collective memory witnessed in modernised countries (the conventional “West” and “Europe”, where we include Russia as well) is resulting in the actualisation of images of past wars, primarily, the total wars of WWI and WWII. For example, the Great Patriotic War¹⁵ is a very significant event in Russia, and accordingly Georgy Zhukov is the first name to come to the minds of Russians when they hear the phrase “hero of the Fatherland” based on a survey conducted in late 2019, with the next most popular answer a distant second. When military figures are revered as heroes – whether rulers (Joseph Stalin, Peter the Great, or Alexander Nevsky), or generals (Alexander Suvorov, Mikhail Kutuzov, Fedor Ushakov, Ivan Konev, Rodion Malinovsky, or Konstantin Rokossovsky) – it is symptomatic of something larger. This pantheon even includes modern political figures such as Alexander Lebed and Sergei Shoigu.¹⁶

Military history plays a significant role in other Western countries as well. Wars are important in American perceptions of history¹⁷, while fully 80% of young people in 14 EU countries (according to a survey conducted in 2012–2014)

¹¹ Complete list of constitutional amendments: what are we voting for? // State Duma of the Russian Federation. 2020. March 14. URL: <http://duma.gov.ru/news/48045>.

¹² *Istoriya strany: stavim «otlichno», v ume derzhim «neud»* // VTSIOM. 2017. Sep 14. URL: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=3581>.

¹³ *Rodina – eto zvuchit gordo!* // VTSIOM. 2016. Sep. 16. URL: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=414>.

¹⁴ *Istoriya Rossii: gde pravda, a gde vymysel?* // VTSIOM. 2015. May 18. URL: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=35>.

¹⁵ *Den' Pobedy: sokhranim pamyat' o podvige!* // VTSIOM. 2018. May 8. URL: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=9082>.

¹⁶ *Geroi Otechestva: vybor rossiyan* // VTSIOM. 2019. Dec. 9. URL: <https://wciom.ru/index.php?id=236&uid=10060>.

¹⁷ See: Savelyeva I.M., Poletayev A.V. *Znayut li amerikantsy istoriyu?* M., 2008. P. 174-176.

believe that World War II is the most important event of the 20th century.¹⁸ Even the attempts to construct a shared European memory that began in the 1990s on the wave of Euro-optimism involved treating the Holocaust as a tragedy for which all the people of united Europe should feel responsible. Note that national (that is, political) identities are not only based on victories, but painful losses as well. The importance of the Battle of Kosovo Field to Serbia is one striking example.

The major importance attached to events in military history in national mythologies can be accounted for, primarily, by the emotional resonance of images associated with the themes of death and bloodshed. Whether we are talking about heroes sacrificing their lives in the name of a nation or political values, or victims of enemy aggression, in either case it is invoking the ultimate human experience, the threshold beyond which the living have not yet crossed. Therefore, the collective “we”, as heirs, should feel a sense of duty and responsibility to those who gave their lives. As the American writer Susan Sontag noted, the advances in photography and the advent of the television brought the suffering of war even closer to home. These images which, as a rule, lack explanatory power, create a “that’s it” effect (that’s what’s important, that’s the story of how it all happened, and the photos capture this story in our minds¹⁹). The images also create a sense of presence, thereby forming an affective connection to something outside our personal experience and structuring our memory. At the same time, certain images (aspects) can be presented almost as national symbols – for example, the raising of the American flag at Iwo Jima in February 1945 or the Soviet Red Banner over the Reichstag, which were actually staged.

Turning to history and military events, in particular, makes it possible to not only define the contours of national memory, but also to strengthen the foundation of legitimacy for current political ideas and values. These are mythologies in the sense that linguist Roland Barthes used the term. It is not the images of war themselves that matter, but the reason they are used. However, the actual political meaning depends on the persuasiveness of the images offered up. Accordingly, the study

¹⁸ Wolnik K., Busse B., Tholen J., Yndigegn C., Levinsen K., Saari K., Puuronen V. “The long shadows of the difficult past? How young people in Denmark, Finland and Germany remember WWII” // *Journal of Youth Studies*. 2017. Vol. 20. No. 2. P. 162-179.

¹⁹ Sontag S. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Quoted by Sontag S. *Smotrim na chuzhiye stradaniya*. M., 2014. P. 65-66.

of specific images of war and examples of cultural reflection is important, first of all, within the context of a general discussion of the collective past. For example, by invoking images of the Jewish victims exterminated by the Nazis, European politicians seek to reinforce, inversely, a commitment to democracy and the value of human rights. In Russia, these events are cited as evidence of the Red Army's liberation mission; in Israel, memory of the disaster at the political level offers a way to counter anti-Semitism and validate the Jewish people's right to their own independent state on this territory.

But while politicians expressly make the desired connection between a historical event and existing political values in speeches, this relationship is not always clear when analysing cultural reflection. For example, the best known and highest grossing Holocaust film in Russia, *Sobibor* (2018), directed by Konstantin Khabensky, tells the history of the death camp through the story of the courageous leader of the uprising, Soviet officer Alexander Pechersky. Israel's largest museum and research centre, and perhaps the most important museum in the country, Yad Vashem (the national memorial to the Holocaust and heroism) offers a consistent narrative starting with the Nazi policy of persecuting Jews and descriptions of the horrors, followed by the heroic resistance and the fight of the Jewish people for a state of their own in the territory which was then Palestine. Tours of the museum end in a strongly symbolic way. You walk out to the observation deck to behold a panoramic view of the holy city of Jerusalem. In the EU, when it comes to museums, films and media content, the emphasis is on suffering, and the justification of democratic values and human rights is usually placed outside the historical narrative and becomes a commentary (voiced by politicians, teachers or public figures) – a decryption key linking the historical narrative to the present.

If we attribute the growing interest in the events of past wars primarily to the search for foundations of collective identities (the answer to the question of “why are we here together and unable to leave?”), that means the cultural conceptualisation of contemporary armed conflicts must be directly related to the legitimacy of violence.

Traditional regular wars, which include almost all European armed conflicts of the 18th – early 20th centuries and both total world wars, are a thing

of the past. Their defining feature was symmetry. They were waged by states against each other, which implied a clear division into combatants and non-combatants, and friends and foes. The course of these wars was determined by regular armies. As a rule, they had a beginning, an official declaration of war, and an end in the form of a peace treaty which enshrined the rebalancing of forces in the international arena. Total wars were characterised by large-scale mobilisation of socio-political and economic systems, when everyone's activity should be contributing to the future victory.²⁰

The regular nature of wars, which was taken for granted and clearly understood, has been absent from most modern armed conflicts, resulting in the breakdown of existing political, legal and cultural languages used to describe them. This is evidenced by the debate which started in the 1980s over the definition of "wars of the 21st century." Each proposed category ("new," "new civil," "hybrid," "network-centric" or "asymmetric") naturally covers particular aspects but, regardless of the heuristic potential, this debate represents primarily a symbolic struggle (precisely in the sense that sociologist Pierre Bourdieu used the concept) for the right to classify specific cases of the use of armed force as criminal or legitimate.

State sovereignty and the place of non-state actors are the two central nerves in this debate. In the first case, there is the ongoing discussion of "humanitarian interventions" (mass violence against civilians may be legitimate grounds for foreign intervention) and "hybrid wars" (techniques for undermining the legitimacy of the enemy's government).²¹ In the second case, the focus is on terrorism and determining which armed rebel groups can be recognised as freedom fighters and which not. However, disagreements arise not only in each specific case when identifying terrorists or whether there is sufficient cause for humanitarian intervention. They exist even at the theoretical level: there is still no consensus among experts on the definition of terrorism or the principles underlying humanitarian intervention.²² Since political, legal, and scientific structures are shaky and their principles are being contested, the role of cultural mechanisms

²⁰ Kumankov A. *Voina v XXI veke. M., 2020. P. 50-58.*

²¹ Fridman O. *Gibridnaya voyna ponyatiy // Vestnik MGIMO-Universiteta. 2016. № 5. P. 79-85.*

²² See: Nikitin A.I. *Konflikty, terrorizm, mirotvorchestvo. M., 2009*; Keohane R. *Public Delegitimation of Terrorism and Coalition Politics // Worlds in Collision: Terror and the Future of Global Order. N.Y., 2002*; Simons G. *Krizis politicheskikh vojn XXI veka. Valdaiskiye zapiski. No.105. M., 2019. URL: <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/valdayskaya-zapiska-105/>.*

in justifying armed violence is on the rise.²³ The point is to use vivid and convincing images and interpretations to prove to both fellow citizens and the international community that armed intervention was justified in a particular case. For example, NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 relied on media images depicting the Kosovars' sufferings, combined with the simultaneous metaphorical invocation of the image of the Holocaust, with Slobodan Milosevic cast as Adolf Hitler, the Kosovars as the Jews and NATO as the Allies.²⁴

By the same token, the series of US interventions since 2001 has been conceptualised in the public space as a "global war on terror." Shortly after 9/11, which caused a severe emotional reaction in the United States and many other countries, a large media campaign began in which terrorism (and those equated with terrorists) was presented as Evil, and the United States as Good. There were some attempts at historical allusion. In 2002, George W. Bush started employing the term "axis of evil", which, in addition to Iraq (preparations for an invasion were already underway), included Iran and North Korea. This was, to a certain extent, motivated by a desire to draw a parallel with the Axis powers during WWII.²⁵ In the fall of 2001, a programme was launched at schools in the United States to show children patriotic films (the most famous of which was *The Spirit of America*) about heroes facing down threats.²⁶ The war on terror turned out to be one of the most popular subjects in modern Hollywood, too. The riveting stories told in many thrillers reinforced the idea of a just war on terror. Media coverage of the war changed as well. During the Vietnam war, photographs and video footage were weaponised as criticism of US policy. By the time the "first Iraq war" began in 1991, the lesson has been learned, and the emphasis in the coverage of Operation Desert Storm was on US technological superiority, leaving the tragic side of the war out

²³ *In this case, we believe it is more advisable to stick to this concept, which involves comparing a certain decision with a certain external ideal. If we follow Sebastiano Maffettone's thinking, justification is contrasted with legitimation as a process when a certain procedure is used to get wide support for an adopted decision. See: Maffettone S. Just War and Humanitarian Intervention. Valdai Papers No. 19. M., 2015. URL: https://valdaiclub.com/a/valdai-papers/valdai_paper_19_just_war_and_humanitarian_intervention/.*

²⁴ Aleksander Dzh. *Smysly sotsialnoi zhizni: kultursotsiologiya*. M., 2013. P. 218-219.

²⁵ Akhmedova L.S.H. *Strategiya natsional'noi bezopasnosti SShA v svete sobytii 11 sentyabrya 2001 goda // Izvestia Dagestanskogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta. Obschestvennye i gumanotarnye nauki*. 2011. No. 2. P. 10.

²⁶ Nikolai F.V. *Polemika o travme i pamyati v amerikanskikh issledovaniyakh kultury*. M., Nizhny Novgorod: Flinta, Izdatel'stvo Mininskogo universiteta, 2017. P. 34-36.

of the picture. In the early 2000s the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq became spectacles of heroism.²⁷

All this revived medieval notions of a “holy war” in the public space, only the focus had shifted from defending Christianity to protecting civilians oppressed by terrorists. Some analysts use the term “police action,” meaning that instead of clashes between states pursuing their national interests, the use of military force is now justified as a way to restore global order. These two images, which have been imbued with emotion and specific content by cultural institutions, play a key role in maintaining the existing order.

Interestingly, Russia also joined this discourse at the level of the media image produced by the state, invoking the concepts of the “war on terror” and the “responsibility to protect” civilians during the Georgian war of 2008 (the “Ossetian genocide” was often discussed in the media at the time), and also when criticising the actions of the Ukrainian government in Donbass and the Syrian operation.

However, this does not mean that the influence of these images stems exclusively from how people are hardwired politically. In each specific war, major efforts need to be made to convince the public that particular rebels are terrorists or that a particular regime is committing mass crimes against its people. Keeping the agenda credible is another concern. Although the American example has figured prominently in this paper, it is worth pointing out that, according to polls in the summer of 2019, most adult Americans and even veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan believe the wars were not worth fighting.²⁸

Heroic vs non-heroic societies

The production of collective identity and the justification of armed violence are two key *political goals*, and images of war are critical to their attainment. However, war’s diverse cultural reflection should not be reduced

²⁷ Sontag S. *Ibid.* P. 51.

²⁸ Majorities of U.S. veterans, public say the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were not worth fighting // Pew Research Center. 2019. 10 July. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/10/majorities-of-u-s-veterans-public-say-the-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-were-not-worth-fighting>.

to politics. At the turn of the 21st century, the very understanding of war underwent fundamental changes, which can be described at the social level as the transformation of a number of “heroic” societies into “post-heroic” societies. At the cultural level, these changes are reflected in the evolution of the structural principles underlying the narrative of the war, or, simply put, a progressive (heroic) narrative is being replaced by a tragic narrative.

Working independently, the war theorists Edward Luttwak and Herfried Münkler came up with the concept of a “post-heroic” era to describe how western countries predominantly perceive war. Heroism is inextricably linked with culturally reproducible norms that form the image of the hero. Important here are the code of conduct and the standards which the military must live up to in order to earn the glory and special treatment that await. So, there is nothing unusual about the fact that, for example, amid socio-political modernisation and the gradual transition from a professional army to a “people’s army” in Russia during the 19th and early 20th century, we observe greater variety in images of heroes and the differentiation of the system of awards.²⁹ As nation states were taking shape (Russia could be considered a nationalising empire) and military service became the main civic virtue for each member of the national community, heroic societies were in ascendancy. The rules and practices of the militaries were practically accorded the status of civic virtues. Accordingly, at the cultural level, images of war were constructed on the basis of a progressive narrative, which was often nationally oriented as well. Wars became redefined as the nation’s heroic resistance against a variety of enemies, victory over which led to national unity, and military exploits became examples of service to the Fatherland, regardless of what the combatants really thought, felt and did on the battlefield.

However, starting in the mid-20th century, serious changes began to occur. The destructive nature of the First and Second World Wars forced us to consider the price of military violence in the industrial age. The proliferation of nuclear weapons led to increased fears that humanity as a species would wipe itself out.

²⁹ Here’s a historical example to illustrate this point. Under Catherine the Great, there was only one Military Order (St George) for the officers. However, a badge for lower ranks was introduced during the Napoleonic wars. By the First World War it was renamed the St George Cross with four degrees. The official St George Medal appeared at about the same time to honour civilians who distinguished themselves on the frontlines. Moreover, from the beginning of the 19th century, there were collective St. George awards (St. George’s banners, trumpets, etc.), and in the middle of the century, as Russia strengthened in the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Military Order insignia for Muslim peoples appeared (without image Orthodox saint).

The demographic slump in developed countries, where families with one child or two children have become the norm, made the prospect of potential military losses even more difficult to bear. In some countries, the social make-up of the armed forces has begun to change as well (for example, the number of military personnel in the United States decreased from 2.06 million to 1.3 million from 1990 to 2017. The number of female service members increased to 17 percent and white Americans now account for only 54 percent of the force).³⁰

Moreover, in the context of the democratisation of political life, the state is now increasingly perceived as the guarantor of security that provides necessary services to the people, while military mobilisation in times of crisis is increasingly met with criticism. Convincing arguments have to be made to obtain consent to send troops to a “hot spot”, as was the case in Russia in the 1990s. Sending conscripts to Chechnya provoked a sharply negative public response. Or, take, for instance, the United States which, after 19 soldiers died or were taken prisoner in Somalia in 1993, called off the intervention entirely. However, this problem was partially resolved thanks to innovative military technology that created an asymmetry in modern military conflicts and resulted in the “denationalisation” of the army, with military tasks increasingly being shifted onto contract servicemen or private security companies.

As a result, the norms of heroic behaviour have become superfluous for society in general: the ideals of heroism and self-sacrifice are becoming a thing of the past and being replaced by the image of martyrdom, which, as Münkler wrote, “means a sacrifice made as a compensation for damage rather than an act of redemption or atonement. Soldiers’ death benefits ratio to GDP in this regard could serve as an indicator of the degree of post-heroism in a society. Such societies, if they get involved in armed conflicts, tend, in principle, to prevent or at least minimise loss of life.”³¹ Even if the “classical” norms of heroism continue to be cultivated in the military, in practice, most often people are motivated by money and power rather than honour and glory. Thus, in the era of post-heroism, heroism gives way to military entrepreneurship.³²

³⁰ Amanda Barroso. *The changing profile of the U.S. military: Smaller in size, more diverse, more women in leadership* // 2019. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/10/the-changing-profile-of-the-u-s-military/>.

³¹ Munkler G. *Kriegssplitter : Die Evolution der Gewalt im 20 und 21 Jahrhundert*. Quoted by Myunkler G. *Oskolki voiny: Evolyutsiya nasiliya v XX i XXI vekakh*. M., 2018. P. 189.

³² Myunkler G. *Ibid.* P. 161.

Alongside the emergence of post-heroic societies in Western countries, an alternative narrative about war began to gain traction. Sociologist Jeffrey Alexander was among the first to note it. Studying images of the Holocaust, he observed a gradual displacement of the progressive narrative by a tragic narrative. Whereas the progressive narrative focused on overcoming social evils and the traumas of the past (which inevitably became associated with certain political values), the tragic narrative operates not unlike an ancient Greek tragedy and focuses on tragedy itself. Triumphant over adversity is no longer part of the story. Instead the terrible events themselves are the focus. They are constantly returned to as a symbolic experience, the way out of which is catharsis rather than mastery. "Catharsis quickly purifies emotions and passions, making the audience relate to the characters of the story, encouraging them to experience the suffering of the characters with them and to understand (as the characters themselves never do) the real cause of their death."³³

A similar approach can be found in a number of films, such as *Schindler's List* directed by Steven Spielberg (1993) and *The Pianist* by Roman Polanski (2002). The TV series *Holocaust* by Marvin Chomsky (1978) was one of the first to tackle this subject matter. Despite criticisms by historians, the decision to address the tragedy in the form of an ordinary melodrama generated widespread public interest in the Holocaust not just in the United States, but Europe as well, including Germany.

Although it is most comfortable to regard the Holocaust, which has become such an important theme in modern Western culture, through the lens of the tragic narrative, in reality the issue is about the broader process of "cultural transcoding" of war images. A brief overview of the key points follows.

The transformation of the Holocaust in Western countries by the late 20th century into a universal metaphor for absolute evil (sacred evil), which has allowed it to be invoked in relation to other mass crimes, such as the Armenian Genocide, the mass ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in the 1990s and earlier crimes, such as slavery and the extermination of the native population of the United States. Of key importance is the question of the moral and political responsibility of ruling elites and ordinary citizens for whatever crimes were committed with their complicity or at least tacit approval. It is very telling that the attempts to build a pan-European culture of memory

³³ Aleksander J. *Ibid.* P. 167.

in the 1990s-2000s began precisely with a discussion of the different levels of complicity of European societies in the implementation of the “final solution”. Of course, this was rejected by conservative elites, primarily in Eastern Europe. The most striking example is Poland, where this theme of the everyday complicity of Poles in a policy of genocide came into conflict with the national myth being constructed (especially by the conservatives who had assumed power) to elevate the suffering of the Polish people and their heroic battle against the “two totalitarianisms” and to celebrate the great deeds of Polish civilians who saved Jews (the most striking example was the creation, in 2016, of a museum in honour of the Ulma family who were executed by firing squad for sheltering Jews).³⁴ As a result, the original idea of the ethics of personal responsibility for past crimes began deteriorate, as most EU members from Eastern Europe preferred to focus on their own suffering (caused by Stalin’s Soviet Union) rather than their sins.³⁵

The transformation of the museum space. Special memorial museums dedicated to the study of tragic events have been created (the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, the House of Terror in Budapest, the Jewish Museum in Berlin, the Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration in Montgomery, Alabama, and others),³⁶ and exhibits at a number of European museums have been re-organised to emphasise transnational ties in the past and reduce the exclusive focus on national history.

Changes in the logic of commemorating both world wars in Europe, as well as in the content of thematic museum displays and feature films, which grew particularly pronounced in the 2010s. What is happening is the erosion of nationally-oriented narratives in favour of a greater emphasis on personality and personal stories during the war, as well as on the inconsistencies and ambiguity surrounding wartime events. Among the examples of how World War I is being commemorated differently, the Museum of the Great War, which opened in the town of Meaux outside Paris, positions itself as a museum of the entire war, not just the Western front, and history is shown primarily from the “view

³⁴ Hackmann J. *Defending the “Good Name” of the Polish Nation: Politics of History as a Battlefield in Poland, 2015–18* // *Journal of Genocide Research*. 2018. Vol. 20. No. 4. P. 587-606.

³⁵ See: Miller A.I. *Politika pamyati v postkommunisticheskoi Yevrope i yeyo vozdeystviye na yevropeyskuyu kulturu pamyati* // *Politiya: Analiz. Khronika. Prognoz (Zhurnal politicheskoi filosofii i sotsiologii politiki)*. 2016. № 1 (80). P. 111-121.

³⁶ Sodaro M. *Exhibiting atrocities. Memorial Museums and the Politics of Past Violence*. New Brunswick, Newark, London, 2018.

from the trench,” through the eyes of rank-and-file soldiers. Communicating the polyphony of the nation’s collective memory of World War I has become one of the key media strategies for covering commemorative events in the UK.³⁷ The computer game, *Valiant Hearts: The Great War*, released in time for the 100th anniversary, also focuses on the fates of ordinary people amid the carnage.

New history textbooks published in Western countries: the progressive narrative with its emphasis on state governance and military victories is gradually giving way to an emphasis on social, economic, tragic and humanitarian issues. The Germany-based Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research is an influential voice in discussions of the contents of history textbooks. It publishes a journal which vehemently criticises the nationally-oriented approach and its focus on military achievements and successes (even in defence of liberal values and democracy). Depending on the subject, some authors take aim at the weaknesses of national-patriotic myths, while others regard the focus on military victories as a broader justification of militarism.³⁸ It’s not that textbooks shouldn’t cultivate a way of thinking or promote certain values. The issue is what kind of textbooks they should be. In particular, nationalistic narratives based on the figure of the hero, self-sacrifice and glorification of national achievements are being disavowed, and in their place civic values, human rights and recognition of past mistakes are being elevated. Interestingly, a number of articles have appeared on teaching the history of the Holocaust, where the authors focus on the inadequate attention that is given to this subject in school programmes, which resonates with a number of Russian materials about the insufficient prominence given to the topic of the history of the Great Patriotic War in the education system.³⁹

³⁷ Andrews M. *Commemorating the First World War in Britain: A Cultural Legacy of Media Remembrance* // *Journal of War & Culture Studies*. 2019. Vol. 12. No. 3. P. 295-313.

³⁸ Cm. Ingrao Ch. *Weapons of Mass Instruction: Schoolbooks and Democratization in Multiethnic Central Europe* // *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*. 2009. Vol. 1. No. 1. P. 187; Scott S. *The Perpetuation of War in U.S. History Textbooks* // *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*. 2009. Vol. 1. No. 1. P. 59-70; Sharp H. *Representing Australia’s Involvement in the First World War. Discrepancies between Public Discourses and School History Textbooks from 1916 to 1936* // *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*. 2014. Vol. 6. No. 1. P. 1-23; Ayaz Naseem M. *Deconstructing Militarism in Pakistani Textbooks* // *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*. 2014. Vol. 6. No. 2. P. 10-24; Haydn T. “Longing for the Past”: *Politicians and the History Curriculum in English Schools, 1988-2010* // *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*. 2012. Vol. 4. No. 1. P. 9-11.

³⁹ Foster S., Burgess A. *Problematic Portrayals and Contentious Content Representations of the Holocaust in English History Textbooks* // *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*. 2013. Vol. 5. No. 2. P. 30; Hirsch S., McAndrew M. *The Holocaust in the Textbooks and in the History and Citizenship Education Program of Quebec* // *Journal of Educational Media, Memory, and Society*. 2014. Vol.6. No. 1. P. 24-41.

Anti-war films gained in popularity in the 2000s and 2010s. For example, according to kinopoisk.ru, which tallies box office grosses internationally, the first feature film about a real (non-fictional) war, Clint Eastwood's *Sniper* (2014) about the Iraq war, ranks just 181. The film follows a sniper who enlists in the US military, but gradually the war begins to take over his life, and his patriotic duty morphs into something all-consuming. If you look at the war films which were nominated for or won an Oscar for Best Picture in the 2010s, you will notice that all of them are military dramas, such as *The King's Speech* (2011), *War Horse* (2012), *Sniper* (2015), *Dunkirk* (2018) and *1917* (2020).

On a separate note, the emergence of post-heroic societies is closely connected with wars becoming increasingly technological, in particular, with the advent of unmanned aerial vehicles, which are capable of striking with their operator located thousands of kilometres away from the battlefield. Even though this type of weapon boasts major advantages (it is less expensive, reduces military and civilian losses, makes possible targeted strikes, shields the troops from the horrors of war and reduces the risk of human error), its usage is not so straightforward. War begins to feel like a computer game, and drone operators resemble office workers who are not bonded together by the ideals of battlefield camaraderie but work for a salary.⁴⁰

Speaking about the proliferation of the tragic narrative, it is worth noting that it has not entirely supplanted the heroic narrative yet. The former is about the courage and heroism of ordinary soldiers, but in the films or museums they are increasingly becoming a reflection of personal valour rather than a symbol of a nation at war. We are talking specifically about the cultural reflection of war, and it would be premature to say that this interpretation of wars or their history is the most authentic and depoliticised. For example, the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. begins with a photograph showing liberation of Dachau by American troops, even though this concentration camp had only a minor role in the implementation of the "final solution". The Museum of the Great War in Meaux says almost nothing about the Russian Front. The anti-war film *Dunkirk*, which documents the tragic events of 1940 and the personal choices of different people caught up in that tragedy, contains heroic and patriotic notes. At a crucial moment,

⁴⁰ Kumankov A. *Voina v XXI veke. pp. 265–266.*

when it seems that hundreds of thousands of soldiers will be captured or killed, a British Navy officer, asked by his lieutenant “What do you see?”, exclaims “Home!” followed by a shot of a ragtag fleet of civilian ships, boats and yachts that had come to the rescue of the British and French soldiers on Dunkirk beach.

The same is true for many computer games, the creators of which say they want to highlight the controversy in war, but then reproduce politicised clichés. For example, in the super popular first-person shooter game *Call of Duty* (2003), “good” Soviet soldiers are forced to fight under the leadership of the “bad” Soviet regime. The developers of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* about Syria claimed they wanted to show how blurry the line between good and evil can become. But British soldiers are the heroes, and Russians are the villains.⁴¹

Russia’s special path

From the perspective of the technological advancement of the Russian armed forces or the country’s demographics, to name a few, Russia should be designated as a post-heroic society. This is also evidenced by the fact that the public response to the South Ossetia campaign or the Syria operation has not been accompanied by the creation of new heroes. Even finding a complete list of modern recipients of the Order of St George (albeit, without a description of their exploits) can be challenging.

Attempts to glorify the Second Chechen War, such as the exploits of the Pskov paratroopers, remain on the periphery of the politics of memory, even though they received some official attention during the 20th anniversary of these events in late 2019 – early 2020. Similarly, the 40th anniversary of the start (and the 30th anniversary of the end) of the Afghan war in 2019 passed almost unnoticed. There was no support for an initiative brought by veteran organisations to revise the 1989 resolution of the Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR Supreme Council expressing moral and political condemnation of the decision

⁴¹ Naumov A. “Nash Sovetsky Soyuz pokoriayet ves mir”//Rossiisky sovet po mezhdunarodnym delam. 2020. URL: https://russiancouncil.ru/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/nash-sovetskiy-soyuz-pokoryaet-ves-mir/?sphrase_id=34739217.

to send Soviet troops to Afghanistan, and the anti-war film *Brotherhood* (2019) by Pavel Lungin, released in time for the anniversary, failed at the box office and was dismissed by a number of veterans of the war in Afghanistan. Renat Davletyarov's film *Donbass. Outskirts* (2019), which follows the classical tragic narrative, offers the best interpretation of the events in south-eastern Ukraine. The armed conflict is presented as a tragic civil war, while its political and international dimensions are omitted. It is portrayed as a disaster, in the face of which the characters must make moral choices. The main positive character, the militia member Anatoly Tkachenko, is presented as a defender of the people, forced to take up arms, rather than as a representative of a particular political force.

Andrei Volgin's film *The Balkan Frontier* (2019), on the other hand, is an exception. It tells the true story of the Russian peacekeepers who took over the airport in Pristina shortly after the bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO forces commenced. The depiction of the suffering of the Serbs is complemented with the rather heroic story of their defence by the Russians (even though the film emphasises that the members of the detachment come from every corner of the post-Soviet space, as well as different ethnic backgrounds).

Military imagery in Russia is mostly historical. Furthermore, official policy on matters related to memory places them in the context of a progressive, heroic narrative. The symbolic assembly of the Russian nation is taking place around this narrative, with the state at the centre and service to it the ultimate virtue.

The Great Patriotic War, which has become the "foundational myth" of the Russian nation, is the most important event in this regard. The overarching goal is to bring the war closer to ordinary people, to make it part of their everyday experience. This is being achieved in part by expanding the symbolic space with more monuments. In recent years, dozens of new monuments in the aesthetic tradition of Soviet monumentalism have been erected throughout Russia by the Russian Military Historical Society alone. More than 3,000 memorial plaques have appeared on the walls of schools attended by heroes of the Soviet Union. Another strategy is to support new, interactive forms of commemoration. This includes promoting the historical re-enactment movement, using multimedia museum technology (for example, the dramatic transformation of the Victory Museum's exposition in 2019–2020), and supporting various online projects.

A new form of commemorating the Great Patriotic War, the Immortal Regiment march, was created in the mid-2010s. The march combined countless personal stories into one big national ceremony. Notably, the success of the march abroad (thousands of our compatriots participate in Berlin) made it possible for the first time to talk about a “Russian world”, which has been the subject of controversy since the 2000s. Even though this concept suffers from internal contradictions at the theoretical level, and the methods of implementing this policy constantly draw criticism both from experts and our compatriots abroad, it is nonetheless notable that invoking images from military history made it possible to map the extent of the vibrant, diverse Russian world for all to see.

Other wars were commemorated on a grand scale in the 2010s, including the Patriotic War of 1812 and the First World War. At the level of official commemoration, they were all placed in the context of a nationally oriented heroic narrative, while the tragic aspects were pushed to the periphery of the public space. Over 100 monuments and memorial sites dedicated to soldiers of those wars were erected throughout Russia in a matter of five years, owing to the efforts of the state, of course, but primarily to various civic organisations. The largest monuments (such as the monuments to the heroes of the First World War in Moscow on Poklonnaya Gora and in Kaliningrad) follow in the Soviet tradition of heroic monumental art. Perhaps the only monument from this multitude that conveys the tragedy of that war is located in the town of Gusev, Kaliningrad Region. It is a sculpture by Mikhail Shemyakin with the suggestive title, “In memory of a forgotten war that changed the course of history.” The monument was commissioned by a private company. So, we can say that the tragic aspect of that war was not popular even with the civic organisations involved in commemorative actions and events.⁴²

Russian feature films also show the prevalence of national heroic imagery. According to data from *Byulleten Kinoprokatchika*, the military history film *T-34* was in the top 20 for *all films* from 2004 to 2020, both in terms of the number of viewers and box office receipts. If we take the 2004–2020 revenues *only for domestic films*, films about the Great Patriotic War (*T-34* and *Stalingrad*) rank 3rd

⁴² We have reviewed this area of commemoration in greater detail here, see: Pakhalyuk K.A. *Institutsionalizatsiya pamyati o Pervoy mirovoi voine v Rossii (k zaversheniyu 100-letnego yubileya)* / K.A. Pakhalyuk // *Problemy sokhraneniya pamyati i memorializatsii naslediya Pervoy mirovoi voiny* / red.-sost. S. A. Mozgovoi. - M.: Institut Naslediya, 2019. P. 84-114.

and 6th, respectively, and *The Viking* comes 7th. If we take the 20 most popular films for the same period, the rankings are even more different: *T-34* ranks 3rd, *Stalingrad* 9th, *The 9th Company* 10th, *The Viking* 11th, *The Admiral* 13th and *The Turkish Gambit* 16th.⁴³ Clearly, there is robust interest in war films. If we exclude *The 9th Company*, which was released 15 years ago, most of the other films fall into the heroic category. Importantly, the film *Panfilov's 28* (2016) by Kim Druzhinin and Andrei Shaliopa is the most successful example of crowd funding in Russian cinema. Its creators deliberately omitted love, drama and politics to focus exclusively on military valour.

However, since the war is not part of the everyday experience of most Russians, and military images in the media and art have become fairly hollowed out, the dominant focus on heroism threatens not only to blot out the tragic aspects of war, but also to foster a perception that war is nothing but a game. This is when images of war become replaced with signs of war. Historical re-enactment is a case in point. Reenactors pay a great deal of attention to getting the weapons, uniforms and fighting tactics right. In this way, the accuracy with which individual material elements are recreated is presented as the “historical truth.” This approach can be seen in public discussions as well, when a particular history film is criticised for poorly chosen, inauthentic props, which spoil the verisimilitude of the story. One consequence is that directors start focusing on recreating all the details to guard against accusations of lacking historical authenticity. While promoting *Panfilov's 28*, its creators focused on the historical accuracy of details to obscure the fact that the story behind the film is a Soviet myth. Or take the most successful domestic war film, *T-34* (2018) by Alexei Sidorov. The plot revolves around the crew of a Soviet tank which managed to destroy an entire enemy tank company in 1941. Later, the crew members escaped from a concentration camp in a tank. The Germans are depicted as a basically simple and weak adversary, turning what was a heroic feat into little more than an exciting adventure. The focus on attributes of the era which are faithfully rendered on the screen (uniforms, tank tactics and the sounds of war) are supposed to lend credibility to the film. But at the same time, it reduces the war in all its complexity, tragedy and heroism (which cannot be understood without mentioning that the Soviet Union was fighting a very strong enemy) to a comic book of superheroes that does not show the realities of the past, provides no food for thought, and fails to offer up

⁴³ *Byulleten kinoprokatchika. Statistika*. URL: <http://www.kinometro.ru/kino/analitika>.

any role models.

Thus, speaking about images of war in modern culture, it is necessary to pay attention not only to the political implications (the problem of legitimising the use of armed force or building the foundations of collective identities), but also to the general perception of the norms adopted in professional military communities by society (heroic or post-heroic?), as well as the principles underlying war stories in general.

Neither the progressive or tragic narrative is “better” or “worse” than the other. Both can suffer from distortions of the historical record and political propaganda, and can hollow out events to the point where a film becomes entirely one-dimensional. It is noteworthy that even in Germany it is increasingly said that the memory of the Holocaust has been reduced to the reproduction of rituals and clichés. The key task, probably, is to ensure that both narratives are sufficiently present in the public sphere, since it is politically dangerous to promote only the images of heroes without discussing the problems of responsibility for the use of military force. The lack of readiness of cultural institutions to emphasize the tragedy of the war will potentially contribute to the strengthening of political “hawks,” while the rejection of heroism will make mass mobilization difficult in the event of a military threat.

Understanding the principles that underlie the cultural logic of different countries is important for intercultural interactions and implementing foreign policy strategies that fall under that vague term “soft power.” It is unlikely that heroic images of one historical figure will be widely accepted by those who are accustomed to a different view of war. In this regard, attempts to erect monuments to one’s own heroes in foreign countries are likely to backfire, and if relations deteriorate, they may become the target of attacks by political radicals.

However, it is worth keeping in mind that when trying to understand the war culturally, the legitimacy of the use of violence is of prime importance, not only with regard to specific operations, but globally as well. The key problem is that today Russia has practically given up trying to set the terms of the debate with the support of its cultural institutions, thereby depriving itself of a symbolic resource.

Matthias Uhl

May 8 in German Historical Memory

The culture of memory is important for collective historical and political consciousness, as it aids the process of community formation. In the Soviet Union and now in modern Russia, May 9, 1945 is marked as the day when Nazi Germany was conclusively defeated, bringing the Great Patriotic War to an end after years of countless fatalities and untold suffering. The situation in Germany is different, and its approach to this day has always been complex. However, the approach to May 8 shows, to some extent, the evolution of Germany's culture of memory and political culture.

Germany's occupation by the Allies spelled the end of the war. It was not a direct act of liberation from the National Socialist dictatorship, but it was consistent with the principles of war and international law. When, in early July 1945, Soviet troops moved into the territory west of the Elbe River abandoned by the Americans and the British, the Communist Party of Germany officially greeted them as liberators in those German towns and communities. In Leipzig, the German communists greeted the advancing Red Army units with banners such as, "Red Leipzig welcomes the Red Army" or "Long live Soviet Saxony, the future Soviet Republic." The residents of Erfurt even "demanded" to be "united with the Soviet Union."

Beginning in April 1945, there was a shift in focus in the Soviet military's official attitude to Germany. According to American historian Norman Naimark, interest shifted to a desire to establish dialogue with anti-fascists and other progressive elements of German society.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, eradicating National Socialism by the roots and achieving victory over Germany remained the primary objective of the Soviet Armed Forces in the spring of 1945. Unlike Eastern Europe, there was no mission to liberate Germany initially. All efforts were focused entirely on achieving its unconditional surrender. That is why the medal dedicated to the end of the war, which was awarded to millions after May 9, 1945, was called "For the victory over Germany in the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945."

⁴⁴ Norman N. Naimark: *The Russians in Germany: a history of the Soviet Zone of occupation. 1945–1949*, Cambridge 1995, P. 76.

May 8 as Liberation Day in the German Democratic Republic under Walter Ulbricht

For the Communist Party of Germany, liberation was supposed to become a sustainable myth and be part of the identity of the state, as communist Walter Ulbricht understood it. The establishment of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and its socialist transformation were looked at as a temporary surge in a continuous upward trend, set in motion by Germany's liberation. Walter Ulbricht adhered to the definition of fascism given by the Comintern⁴⁵ after 1945 as well, and thus preventively freed the GDR from the legacy of National Socialism, offering itself as a "progressive alternative" in German history. Accordingly, communist emigration, communist resistance, and the crushing of National Socialism by the Soviet Armed Forces were seen as decisive historical factors in the creation of the "first socialist state on the German soil."

"The liberation of the German people from Nazi fascism by the Soviet Union and its allies," reads a history book published in East Berlin in 1981, "provided a chance for make a historic change and build a democratic and progressive peace-loving German state."⁴⁶ Reiterating that the East Germans were, in fact, liberated on May 8, 1945 created the most important foundation for legitimising the rule of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) until the last days of the GDR. The regime was able to derive moral benefits from the thesis of liberation, as "no one could doubt the odious nature of the Hitler regime when looking at the mountains of dead bodies it left behind."⁴⁷

National Socialism was defeated primarily by the Soviet Union which lost over 27 million of its people to achieve this end. Thus, according to SED's line of thinking, the Soviet Union gave East Germany the freedom it needed to change the political system. At the same time, the state created in the Soviet occupation zone explicitly dissociated itself from the Federal Republic of Germany, where former functionaries of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) had assumed important positions. The liberation by the Red Army became the creation myth of the GDR.

⁴⁵ From the definition of fascism formulated by the Comintern in the 1930s: "Fascism is not about power that transcends class or the power of the petty bourgeoisie or the lumpen proletariat over financial capital. Fascism is the power of financial capital itself. It is about organising terrorist reprisals against the working class and the revolutionary part of the peasantry and intelligentsia. Fascism in foreign policy is the crudest form of chauvinism, which cultivates the zoological hatred of other peoples."

⁴⁶ Rolf Badstübner u.a. (Hrsg.): *Geschichte der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik*, Berlin 1981, S. 28.

⁴⁷ Hubertus Knabe: *Tag der Befreiung? Das Kriegsende in Ostdeutschland*, Berlin 2005, S. 19.

Since 1945, the Communist Party of Germany sought to popularise the concept of liberation. Former Resistance fighters, now members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDPD), in particular Otto Grotewohl, Jakob Kaiser, Andreas Hermes, provided support to this effort. They had been talking about liberation since 1945, but Soviet censors regularly crossed out this term, steeped in German vanity, from the manuscripts of speeches and newspaper articles. Initially, they used the phrase “the collapse of the anti-popular regime of aggressive Nazi Germany.”⁴⁸

The GDR’s founding was the only thing that made the paradigm shift possible. According to the April 21, 1950 decision of the GDR Volkskammer (People’s Chamber), May 8 was proclaimed a national holiday, Liberation Day. The final text of the law read, “this day [...] marks the start of a new period in German history in which the German people, with the assistance of all progressive anti-fascist and democratic forces, were guided from disaster and poverty to life in an environment of freedom, peace and prosperity. [...] Therefore, May 8, 1945 and October 7, 1949 are the turning points in our new German history whose meaning is decisive for the future of the German people and the preservation of world peace.”⁴⁹

On May 11, 1950, Joseph Stalin officially congratulated the SED Central Committee and Chairman of the GDR Council of Ministers Otto Grotewohl on the anniversary of the “liberation of the German people from the tyranny of fascism.” By doing so, he consecrated the day of liberation as an official culminating point, which, according to historian Christoph Classen, “with the help of a semantically created image of victim, was supposed to impart an aura of sanctity and inviolability to a secular communist project in Germany, which was hardly able to win the support of the majority of the people.”⁵⁰

However, the Soviet Union did not claim to be the liberator of the Germans. In the USSR, the unshakable postulate of “suppressing and defeating Nazi Germany”, formulated back in 1945, lived on. Not a single

⁴⁸ Jan Foitzik: *Sowjetische Hegemonie und Ostintegration in der DDR*, in: Dierk Hoffmann, Michael Schwartz, Hermann Wentker (Hrsg.): *Vor dem Mauerbau. Politik und Gesellschaft in der DDR der fünfziger Jahre*, München 2003, S. 41.

⁴⁹ *Gesetzblatt der DDR 1950, Nr. 46, S. 355.*

⁵⁰ Christoph Classen: *Vom Anfang im Ende: "Befreiung" im Rundfunk*, in: Martin Sabrow (Hrsg.): *Geschichte als Herrschaftsdiskurs. Der Umgang mit der Vergangenheit in der DDR*, Köln/Weimar/Wien 2000, S. 100.

major historiographic paper on WWII written in the Soviet Union mentioned the liberation of Germany. The Red Army liberated the countries of Eastern and Southern Europe and even Austria. According to Soviet historiography, Germany was “defeated” by Soviet forces.

The idea of liberation put forward in Germany even before 1949 arose primarily from the discourse of those who were persecuted under National Socialism and thus highly susceptible to it. It resonated with the minority’s desire to use history to substantiate their claims to moral and political leadership of the country. However, it had already long been the case that these publicly advanced claims were aimed at reorganising Germany under the communist order. Hence, it was necessary to formulate and canonise the historical interpretation of the concept of liberation. While initially it was about justifying the elitist status of a minority, until the GDR’s final moments the concept of liberation served to construct identity at the societal level “because the discourse of persecuted Resistance fighters became an integral part of the discourse under communist rule and thus ceased to be in the minority.”⁵¹

In the ensuing years of SED rule, a trend emerged of stripping the act of liberation of concrete details. The annually celebrated days of remembrance, which were formally tied in with May 8, 1945, were a sort of projection of antifascism that did not lend itself to a more precise definition and was described by obscure terms such as “victim,” “fighter” or “patriot,” and called upon distinguishing between war and peace.

This “nebulous anti-fascism” was a compromise between the upper echelons of the state and ordinary people. The official culture of remembrance in the GDR was reduced to stereotypes and clichés with respect to the National Socialist past, the reasons for which were rooted in different individual memories and interpretations that legitimised political rule.

At the same time, the process of removing concrete details was characterised by a shifting reference point in time from the past to the present and the future. On the 20th anniversary of Liberation Day, for example, *Neues Deutschland* was out with the following heading on its front page: “The future belongs to us!” At the same time, a joint official

⁵¹ Classen, *Vom Anfang im Ende*, S. 101.

military parade of the National People's Army and the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany was held for the first time in the history of the German Democratic Republic. Soldiers marched past SED leader Walter Ulbricht and Chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers Alexei Kosygin and other high-ranking party and state officials, which was supposed to symbolise a kind of common victory in the class struggle against the West.

Shifting gears under Erich Honecker

On May 26, 1967, the People's Chamber of the German Democratic Republic introduced a five-day work week and, without much ado, made Liberation Day a regular working day. However, official commemorative events were held every year until the last day of the GDR's existence as a state. The anti-fascism demonstrated in the process formed the GDR's national identity. The SED leaders were able to firmly entrench the state's views on anti-fascism and liberation as something commonplace in politics. But due to the specific structural environment, a single prevailing culture of memory developed, which left little room for other memories. Official commemorations centred, above all, on the Communist Resistance and the war of liberation waged by the Soviet Union.

Anti-fascism in the GDR was tied into many aspects of everyday culture. Numerous schools, streets and squares were named after Communist Resistance fighters and Soviet liberators, memorials to whom were erected throughout the GDR. As part of the commemorative events held on the occasion of Liberation Day, Germans committed themselves to the hard work of overcoming the past. Time and again fascism, along with racial and ethnic hatred, were described as having been "rooted out" in the land of the GDR, to dramatise the radical break with the past.

Mass graves of Soviet soldiers, as well as memorials and monuments to the victims of fascism, had an important part to play during these events. Memorial complexes taking up large tracts of land were designed to accommodate large numbers of visitors. Soldiers of the National People's Army of the GDR took their military oath here, and visiting memorial sites was a mandatory part of civil rituals, too.

Anti-fascist themes and the topic of May 8 as the Day of Liberation from Fascism and War were given prominence in the education system. According to curriculum guidelines, the purpose of using these events in the learning process was to build a “strong knowledge base” among schoolchildren based on “historical facts,” and to form an “emotional responsiveness among schoolchildren to the Soviet Army’s liberation mission.” To achieve this, teachers needed “knowledge about the sacrifice and heroism of Soviet soldiers during the liberation of Germany from Nazism and the Soviet state’s selfless assistance to our workers as they built up socialism.”⁵² Moreover, there was not much interest in invoking the historical experience of the individual.

The forms of memory employed were increasingly subsumed under the goal of fostering a collective, would-be national, identity. The anti-fascist rituals were too often far removed from personal memories and, therefore, didn’t prompt deep reflection, instead acting as a balm to the consciences of East Germans. The cult of personality and myth-making left no room for a genuine understanding of history, which invariably calls for the exhaustive concretisation of memories. The personal experience of the era of National Socialism receded into the private sphere where it was beyond state control. Some authors, such as Wolfgang Biermann and Christa Wolf wrote memoirs about the end of the war, but they were left out of GDR historiography. Official discussion of the subject was not encouraged.

The efforts to popularise a propagandistic historical picture of liberation were nonetheless effective, because it freed East Germans from their past. The GDR was a state that defined itself as “anti-fascist” and its founders declared a clean break with National Socialism. Therefore, no one in the German Democratic Republic was supposed to feel responsible for the criminal National Socialist regime. Gradually, the idea that the Nazis lived only in the Federal Republic, and the people of East Germany had always been on the side of the liberators, gained traction in the East German state.

“Prescribed anti-fascism” was successful because the ritualisation and superficial treatment of liberation ultimately were about the absolution the state offered to its citizens. East Germans believed that the radical changes in society would erase the painful past, which they wanted to leave

⁵² *Heimatkunde – Methodische Beiträge, Berlin 1984, S. 36.*

behind. Words spoken by a girl from a secondary school in the GDR capture the success of this propaganda, which used history to displace the past. To the question of who won WWII she answered without hesitation: “The Soviet Union and the GDR.”

Notably, while the debate over memory was heated in the Federal Republic, it was non-existent in the GDR, which is plain to see. Consequently, along with the conventional concept of anti-fascism, no alternative proposals for dealing with the past could gain a foothold. All public discourse was controlled by the state till its last days. This did not help form a critically minded public capable of discussing how National Socialism should be understood in the context of history. These circumstances left no place for meaningful public discourse about National Socialism and its crimes.

“Anti-fascism on demand” implied the stable passivity of the majority of the population. There was no broad public initiative to conceptualise the historical past. By the end of the GDR as a state, the anti-fascist ideological concept was no longer able to bind citizens to the state. The limitations of the prescribed anti-fascist education, especially among young people, were becoming increasingly conspicuous. The fact is that the GDR of the late 1980s had over 800 confirmed neo-Nazis. In hindsight, many citizens who lived under SED rule associated anti-fascism with a political system they rejected. A considerable number of East Germans saw its abstract rituals only as a mandatory programme prescribed by the state. On top of it, the manipulative way this concept was deployed called into question the sincerity of the anti-fascist rhetoric. Thus, the chance to create genuine and full-fledged anti-fascism in the GDR was quite simply missed.

May 8 and the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1950s

May 8, 1949 reveals something important about the polarity of positions that would be taken on this anniversary over the course of the ensuing decade. On May 8, 1949, the fourth anniversary of the end of the war, the Parliamentary Council in Bonn adopted the Basic Law (Constitution) and couldn't let this symbolic date pass unremarked. That's how they looked back at the path traveled since 1945.

That day, SPD deputy Walter Menzel spoke about National Socialism's responsibility for the past. But Theodor Heuss, who was shortly after elected the first president of the Federal Republic of Germany, speaking on behalf of the FDP suggested that, deep down, May 8, 1945 is, for everyone "the most tragic and controversial irony of history [...] since we are saved and destroyed at the same time."⁵³ As mentioned already, May 8 is not a cause for celebration in Germany.

In West Germany, the prevalent approach in the 1950s was to regard May 8, 1945 as the day of Germany's total defeat in WWII. Despite its imperialist and racist goals, the war was still interpreted by most Western Germans as a war of nations which the Germans unleashed, waged and lost. Initially, it was not widely viewed as an act of liberation among the Allies, either. Directive JCS1067 issued by the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the US Armed Forces on April 26, 1945 stated "Germany will not be occupied for the purpose of liberation but as a defeated enemy nation."⁵⁴ The policies of denazification and re-education were only partially compatible with the prospect of liberation, though they held promise for the future. Other Allied policies were inconsistent as well. The partition of Germany was the most devastating consequence of the war and reinforced the perception of May 8 as a day of defeat. This was further aggravated by the expulsion of Germans from the territories on the other side of the Oder-Neisse line and areas in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe traditionally inhabited by Germans, casting a shadow over May 8 and the new era it was supposed to usher in.

The relatively trivial interest in May 8, 1945 in the FRG, which did not increase even during celebrations in the GDR, informed the approach taken to May 8 ten years later in 1955. Official Bonn was celebrating the end of the occupation at that time and the conclusion of treaties of accession to the Western community, and paid almost no attention to the anniversary of the end of the war and National Socialist rule, except for a radio address by Chairman of the Bundestag Eugen Gerstenmaier in which he called for peaceful reconciliation with the Soviet Union, but spoke out against its policy of prevarication. Media commentary reflected the prevailing clichés, such as, for example, in *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, where Hitler was described as a demon, the concept of collective guilt was rejected, and the Allies' policy of re-education was criticised. True, there were those who cautioned

⁵³ *Parlamentarischer Rat: Stenographische Berichte über die Plenarsitzungen in Bonn 1948/49, S. 234.*

⁵⁴ *Direktive JCS 1067, auf http://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=2297&language=german.*

against rushing to conclusions and offered reminders of just what led to May 8, 1945. In this regard, one can name journalist Harry Pross, writer Helmut Gollwitzer and historian Hans Rothfels, who studied the events that led to this date starting in 1933.

May 8 and the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1960s and 1970s

West German society's approach to the period of National Socialism began to undergo a dramatic shift in the early 1960s. It was a protracted process that eventually changed the way May 8, 1945 was interpreted.

Significant work was done to explore the events that led to 1933. The processes at work in the Third Reich also came under scrutiny. In particular, there was a reckoning with the murder of Jews that became central to how people thought about the National Socialist regime in the 1960s. At the same time, the war and the suffering of the Germans were receding into the background. May 8, 1945 could no longer exist separately from the story that began in 1933.

It has become easier for younger generations to face the truth that, following the defeat of the Resistance on July 20, 1944, the National Socialist regime could only be toppled by external forces. These generations did not make sacrifices on the altar of the war and, after the crimes of National Socialism became known, they never identified themselves with what Germans did during the war, with the Wehrmacht or with the war machine in general. Different approaches to National Socialism in Germany created tensions between different generations of Germans.

As a result, the approach to May 8 began to evolve. In 1965, the 20th anniversary of the end of the war prompted a major response in the media. Federal Chancellor Ludwig Erhard warned his fellow citizens against erasing the "pernicious time of dictatorship" from their memories, while political Bonn was conspicuously absent from a reception hosted by the Soviet ambassador on May 8, 1965. The 1960s were a period of transition where the Federal Republic was overtaken by its National Socialist past.

Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt, who considered himself the head of government of a liberated rather than a conquered Germany, addressed the Bundestag, despite resistance from the CDU/CSU, on the occasion of May 8, 1970. President Gustav Heinemann spoke on the same topic as well. Thus, official Bonn used the 25th anniversary as a way to promote its policy of being good neighbours to everyone, including the East. These changes, including symbolic gestures such as Brandt's kneeling in front of the monument to the fallen fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, were undoubtedly the mark of an entirely new perspective on the victims of a former adversary. The meaning of May 8, 1945, the day the war ended, the day Germany was defeated, was deepened by "a chance for a new era" (Willy Brandt). In his inaugural speech, president Heinemann quoted Theodor Heuss' words about the irony at the heart of the war's conclusion in Germany ("we are saved and destroyed.")

In 1975, this slant in interpreting the past was further entrenched by official Bonn. Federal Chancellor Helmut Schmidt made a statement on the occasion of May 8 at a government meeting. However, remarks by President Walter Scheel came as the main event. He described May 8 as a "moment of self-examination" and noted that the lack of freedom did not start in 1949 or 1945, but in 1933. "Tyranny, war, the extermination of the Jews, the destruction and division of our country – all of that is a consequence of 1933. If we think about June 17, 1953, we must not forget about the need to remember 1933 as well." Hitler was not an "unavoidable fate."⁵⁵ In 1975, the social-liberal coalition took a new approach to May 8, reimagining it as Remembrance Day.

True, there were protest rallies by the opposition, primarily, its national conservative wing and unions of expellees. They believed the injustices suffered by so many Germans were not reflected in the new outlook on history, including on May 8. Opposition members excoriated Bonn's new Ostpolitik, but found themselves increasingly on the fringes of political life. Even Chancellor Helmut Kohl was unable to bring them in from the cold, as hoped. The suffering of these Germans increasingly became a personal experience of their own, not of German society as a whole.

⁵⁵ *Walter Scheel: 30 Jahre nach dem Krieg. Rede in der Schlosskirche zu Bonn am 6. Mai 1975, in: Walter Scheel: Vom Recht des anderen. Gedanken zur Freiheit, Düsseldorf/Wien 1977, S. 35.*

1980s: May 8 as Liberation Day in the Federal Republic of Germany

The 1980s were a time of bitter historical and political divides in the Federal Republic over issues of self-identification at the time and, not least, the role of the FRG in the modern world. The debate over May 8 was particularly heated in 1985 amid the 40th anniversary of the end of WWII. Helmut Kohl and members of his government were clearly displeased with the Allies celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Normandy landings. They were looking for symbolic acts to demonstrate reconciliation with former adversaries, which would make such widespread attention on May 8 inappropriate.

The chairman of the CDU/CSU party in the Bundestag, Alfred Dregger, put a different slant on an earlier question about what, in fact, the Germans should celebrate. He believed that every European and democrat can take joy in Hitler's defeat, but not Stalin's victory. At the end of the Thirty Years' War, Europe faced the greatest disaster in its history, but celebrating disasters is not appropriate. Interestingly, journalist Rudolf Augstein largely agreed with Dregger in *Der Spiegel*. But those who wanted to celebrate May 8 as Liberation Day, such as the Association of German Trade Unions, were against it. The debate took on a life of its own, especially after becoming intertwined with the debate over US President Ronald Reagan's visit to a military cemetery in Bitburg, Germany, which was created as a gesture of historical reconciliation. Bowing to public pressure both in Germany and the US, the president added a visit to the memorial at the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

May 8 became the subject of a debate that played out in the opinion sections of newspapers all across the Federal Republic. Nothing like it had been seen in the country, and opinions were polarised. Then Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker's speech at a Bundestag meeting dedicated to the memory of the victims of the war on May 8 was a major moment in his career. He recognised the importance of Liberation Day and talked about different WWII experiences in Germany and Europe in general. Weizsäcker mentioned the fate of various groups of people, trying to place them in a picture of his making, repeating over and over: "May 8 was Liberation Day. This day freed us all from a system built on contempt for humans, the National Socialist tyranny." He also emphasised that the genocide of the Jews was "unheard of in history."⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Richard von Weizsäcker: *Zum 40. Jahrestag der Beendigung des Krieges in Europa und der nationalsozialistischen Gewaltherrschaft. Ansprache am 8. Mai 1985 in der Gedenkstunde im Plenarsaal des Deutschen Bundestages, Bonn 1985.*

Twenty years later, it was justifiably written that “Weizsäcker’s speech on May 8, 1985, delivered as part of his unifying goal of representing the entire population, reflected the attitude of Germans to their historical memory with surprising clarity and depth.”⁵⁷

May 8 in united Germany

What happened to views of May 8 after the tectonic shift of 1989–1990? The antithesis to the epochal year of 1945 was not formed under the influence of changes. However, certain trends that dominated in 1945, such as Germany’s partition and East-West antagonism, were overcome in 1989–1990.

Fifty years after the end of WWII, in 1995, the events of 1945 returned to prominence again. This time, Germany put the focus on concentration camp survivors, for whom the end of the war truly did mean liberation. The thesis of liberation had prevailed. Federal President Roman Herzog painted a picture of an all-encompassing disaster and emphasised the importance of liberation, albeit not as memorably as Weizsäcker.

After 1989–1990, a reunited Germany and its former adversaries in the war began to overcome their historical differences, including with respect to May 8 ceremonies. In 1995, this trend reached its first culminating point, to be followed by another 10 years later, in 2005, when Moscow hosted the main celebrations. Vladimir Putin’s gesture, steeped in the spirit of reconciliation with Germany, garnered the attention of the world.

In 2015, Bundestag President Norbert Lammert called May 8, 1945 Liberation Day. “However, it was not a day of German self-liberation,” Lammert pointed out. “Our thoughts and respect should go primarily to those who gave up so much, both in the ranks of the Western Allies and the Red Army, to put an end to the National Socialist reign of terror.”

On May 7, 2015, in Volgograd, Federal Foreign Minister Walter Steinmeier said: “Seventy years after the enormous suffering visited on this city by Germans, we are no longer alone in our remembrance. Russians, Germans and all the peoples of Europe are united by a common [slogan] ‘Never Again’ and a common responsibility for peace in Europe.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Hurrelbrink, Peter: *Der 8. Mai 1945 – Befreiung durch Erinnerung*, Bonn 2005, S. 218.

⁵⁸ *Gedenkstunde im Bundestag: 70 Jahre Kriegsende: Mahnung für alle Zeit*, auf <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/aktuelles/70-jahre-kriegsende-mahnung-fuer-alle-zeit-299818>.

Hopefully, European states will once again recognise this responsibility and their commitments in the run-up to the 75th anniversary of liberation from National Socialism.

Some remarks in conclusion:

1. Memory of the war as an unprecedented disaster dominated post-war perceptions. Most Germans considered themselves to be victims of the war and Hitler.
2. The German Democratic Republic and the system established by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany positioned themselves as successors of the fighters against Nazism – German anti-fascists and the Soviet Union, thereby joining the victorious camp. Throughout nearly the entire history of the GDR, this complicated any critical analysis of German society's solitary responsibility for the past events.
3. The analysis of Nazi crimes, which became intensified in the 1950s, was increasingly becoming the central element of German self-identification. In parallel, there was a growing understanding of the fact that the disastrous end of the war provided a chance for new democratic development – at least, in West Germany.
4. In the late 1950s, Germans came to be aware of the losses suffered elsewhere in Europe. After the new Ostpolitik was launched in the 1960s, it became evident that the nations of Eastern Europe, including the Soviet Union and its allies, had paid a huge price in blood and been physically destroyed by the conflict. Therefore, the sense of victimhood among Germans receded into the background for some time, but has returned to the spotlight lately.
5. The post-war era was dominated by national perspectives of history, with war memories giving rise to nationalist myths. Today, national cultures of memory are demonstrably different, and a critical appraisal of history in any of the affected countries is still a rarity. However, a critical rethink is necessary – particularly in order to realise that May 8 was a Day of Liberation indeed.

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